

Art on track

By Naveena Vijayan · The Hindu · 2 min

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gita hudson

The gates of the Chennai Rail Museum, open to large mural paintings on the walls. The corridor branches into three: one contains photographs from the early years of the Integral Coach Factory (ICF) and Indian Railways; the second is a well-lit gallery with contemporary paintings (themed on railways) by senior artists such as RM Palaniappan, V Santhanam, Asma Menon, Thejomaye Menon and Maniam Selvan among others; and the third, on the day of our visit, is crowded with spectators gazing at half-empty canvases being filled with colour. ‘The She Train’, as the art camp — an initiative by Integral Coach Factory to promote art in public spaces — is titled, includes eight women artists who, by the end of the day, would be completing two canvases each, and submitting them to be displayed at the ICF Gallery.

Artist Thejomaye, who curated the first edition of the camp, is done with her first canvas, and is mid-way into her second. The first, that rests inclined on the wall, shows a couple sitting by the window seat of a train. “I call it ‘The first journey together,’” she says, elaborating about how nothing is absolute in our lives,

and all beautiful moments, such as a romantic trip in a train, has the lifespan of a snowflake. “And in that brief duration, is it possible to know the true nature of the other? No.” The man in the picture, we realise, is holding onto a mask.

Artist Manisha Raju’s work is that of a mother and daughter standing by a train door, their hair gently flying in the breeze. “This scene is my first thought when I think about trains — my daughter and I travelling to Nagpur and back every summer holiday. It was nearly 18 hours of travel and she would always want to stand by the door and watch the city move,” she says.

It’s almost 4 pm, the artists are wrapping up their work, which they started just that morning. However, the conceptualisation began almost three weeks ago, when the group was taken on a tour of the factory. “It was an eye-opener; we thought that everything was mechanised, but there is just so much labour involved,” says Gita Hudson, whose paintings take one back to Gandhi’s journey in 1893 in South Africa, where he was thrown out of the train because of his race, despite having a first-class ticket.

Asma chips in, “It’s like another world out there. Nuts, bolts, and all the mechanism they use... we were in awe,” she says, finishing up with her painting, which is an ode to night-time train travel, “when the whole town turns into a black canvas, with a few bright light sprinkles on top, making you wonder — can all those sitting by the window by those lights see us wave to them? It’s has been a mystery to me, it still is.”

